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ABSTRACT

Community colleges are poised to play a vital role in Vietnam and other Pacific Rim nations currently seeking to develop their business sectors and economies. Projects and partnerships with U.S. community colleges are currently in progress in India, Malaysia, China, Japan, Taiwan, and Korea. In addition, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training has expressed interest in establishing a community college system in Vietnam. Currently, the Vietnamese educational system places high school-aged students on either a university preparation, vocational technical college, secondary technical education, or teacher training track. The Ministry, however, has identified major problems in this system, including inappropriate curriculum, a lack of training in the right areas of business/industry and of continuity, a lack of business/industry participation in curriculum development, outdated facilities and equipment, and poorly trained and low paid staff. Although Vietnam has recognized the need for a community college system, the upper level educational hierarchy is unfamiliar with participatory curriculum development, tax supported education, and open enrollment policies and is moving slowly. Another major barrier is funding, as sources for loans are limited and politics can interfere with funding efforts. U.S. colleges can help Vietnam develop a college system through feasibility studies, funding, or improving the understanding of international development. (TGI)

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Opportunities for Partnership in the Pacific Rim: Reflections on a Visit to Vietnam

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Community colleges for International Development (19th, Phoenix, AZ, February 3-6, 1996)

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CCID PRESENTATION
Phoenix, Arizonia
February 6, 1996

My congratulations to Anthony Digenakis. It is fitting that we recognize your work in diversity and your care and assistance for so many international students has helped them reach their educational goals and moved their dreams a little closer to reality. You have made a major contribution to community college international education, and we are grateful for such vision, energy and professional dedication.

We are going to need just such vision, energy and professional dedication to work successfully with Vietnam to establish a community college system there. In early December 1995, I travelled to Vietnam with Dr. Van Gwynn, a member of our staff who is native Vietnamese who came to the U.S. in 1979 after the fall of Saigon. We were there at the invitation of the Minister of Education and Training, Professor Dr. Tran Hong Quan to discuss the possibility of developing community colleges in Vietnam.

Just a note of explanation: there are no community colleges in Vietnam at the present time. Two had been established in 1973 while the U.S. was in Vietnam, but they collapsed with the Saigon government. Now, twenty-some years later, the government is reconsidering the role community colleges might play in bringing Vietnam into the 21st century.

Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Vietnam is certainly a complex study in change. One of the pieces of promotional literature for a new business enterprise zone in Ho Chi Minh City refers to Vietnam as the

"jade pearl of the Far East." If that sounds familiar, you may recall that is an old label from French colonial days. In many ways it aptly describes the wealth of natural and human resources, as well as the physical beauty of the country, all at great potential in Vietnam.

But consider that description another moment. Who is using that colonial label? The communist government. Why? To promote free market capitalism. An interesting choice, isn't it?

I encountered this kind of irony, these striking paradoxes over and over again while I was in Vietnam: the new against the old, free market against government control, the prosperous against the devastatingly poor, semi-trucks side by side with ox carts. There was a time when we were walking through a village at night, long after dark. We could see children who should have been doing homework or maybe even in bed bent over their handicrafts, working far into the night to make things for their families to sell the next day. It was quite a striking scene, not at all what I would hope for children anywhere.

I'm sure these same stark contrasts recur in developing countries all over the Pacific Rim.

Contrast, in itself, is not bad. No one would ever suggest that Vietnam or any other nation should sweep aside its history, its culture, or even the painful struggles that emerge from living amidst such competing forces and profound change.

But I'd like to suggest to you this afternoon, that the community college is best fit to play a key role in this part of the world, acting as the intermediary, perhaps even the translator, between the two worlds for several reasons:

1. The majority of the world's population lives in the Pacific Rim: Japan, China, Korea, Taiwan (the Republic of China), the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, and, of course, Vietnam. The sheer number of people needing our help to improve their standard of living is a compelling argument in itself. And each one has a face. These are fellow human beings caught in flux, looking for a better way of life.

2. The area has tremendous natural resources that they need to sell to the rest of the world and that the rest of the world would like to see on the market: oil and other mineral resources, hardwoods, fisheries, agricultural products. Their manufacturing and service capacity is tremendous too: food processing, handicrafts, textiles, electronics, machinery, transportation, tourism, and on and on.

3. A peaceful world depends on stable economic and political relationships. None of us can afford the violence and chaos that emerges from huge chasms between the haves and have-nots of the world. If working with these countries is not a matter of social justice to more privileged nations, it is certainly in our enlightened self-interest.

4. This is where our peculiar bias as educators comes into the argument. We tend to see education as the answer to every problem, but, at least in this case, it's true! As you well know, the community colleges have the knowledge base and the practical expertise to help people start from the ground up. And that's exactly what some in the Pacific Rim, Vietnam, for example, want and need at this moment. Foreign investment is undeniably essential to them. They need our big, multinational corporations to come set up shop in their countries. A glance at the Saigon Times or the Vietnam News will

reveal articles and ads relating to Chrysler, IBM, Ford, Coca-cola, Pepsi, Proctor & Gamble, Caterpillar, even Carrier air conditioners! Microsoft just announced their introducing the Vietnamese version of Windows '95 this spring! Who will these corporations hire? Admittedly, they will bring some of their own people from the U.S. and other nations. But they will also need an educated cadre of native workers. The community colleges are the ones to provide that.

Further, if Vietnam and other developing nations of the Pacific Rim are to succeed as free-standing, free-market economies, they must soon develop their own business and industry that can compete on an equal footing with the multinationals. These nations must create their own skills base, their own management corps, their own infrastructures. Again, they need the education and training that community colleges are so well-suited to provide.

None of these ideas are news to you. It is the professed mission of CCID to identify, develop and expand mutually beneficial international relationships which contribute to the improvement of college programs and services.

And we've already done much of that in the Pacific Rim. In India, right next door to the Pacific Rim, Sinclair Community College and Eastern Iowa Community College have been partnering with the Center for Vocational Education in Madras to develop short-term vocational curricula for the urban and rural poor. Another Sinclair project is working on literacy, especially for women in Madras, and Eastern Iowa is building trade relationships between companies in the U.S. and India, sending faculty to study there to update their own curricula in international business. They are also working with a

Bombay company on water treatment.

Humber College near Toronto and several other colleges are working together in an engineering technology exchange with Malaysia that has been cited by the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation as an exemplary training model in industrial technology.

Delaware Community College in Media, Pennsylvania has also worked in Malaysia, and their work with the Yuen-Lin Institute of Technology in Taiwan is also celebrating its tenth anniversary this year, in addition to its other work in Taiwan.

Florida Community College in Jacksonville has worked with China on hospitality and culinary programs.

At my own Lansing Community College we have a long-standing sister college program with two colleges in Japan, as well as sister college agreements with other Pacific Rim schools in Taiwan, the Republic of Korea, and the People's Republic of China.

There are more projects too, each involving some very hard work--much harder, at times, than just educating people stateside, although that can be pretty daunting sometimes too! Each of these projects, though, is a profound demonstration of the institution's commitment to the belief that international education is better education, for all the schools involved, but also for our world. And that's why we make the effort.

Now let me tell you more about what challenges we will meet working in Vietnam.

The education system is a mix of systems borrowed from the French, the Americans, and the Russians. Children attend elementary school and then, at high school age, are generally placed on one of four tracks: university preparation, vocational

technical college, secondary technical education, or teacher training.

But the Vietnamese are finding problems with this system. The Ministry of Education identifies the following concerns:

1. The curriculum in the schools is not keeping pace with changes in technology and production.

2. The curriculum is not flexible and is not built around a core, nor does it offer any electives for students.

3. There is not enough time in school to adequately train workers to the levels that business and industry need.

4. There are sometimes not enough young people being trained in the right areas to meet the needs.

5. There is a lack of continuity between parts of the system: vocational training courses do not connect well with secondary technical education or higher education.

6. Business and industry do not take part in designing or developing curricula for training.

7. Most schools have very poor, outdated facilities and equipment. I saw this firsthand when I visited the teacher training institution at Vinh-Long. The laboratories and facilities, if one is being gracious, could only be described as inadequate. There is very little equipment, and that which exists is extremely antiquated. It's very difficult to see how this institution could produce any quality teachers. It was much the same at the Technical-Trade High School we visited in Hanoi--a dismally inadequate facility to train the nation's machinists or other technical tradeworkers.

8. Finally, all over Vietnam, the teaching staff is poorly trained, low-paid, and not very well distributed over different subject areas.

A UNESCO report cited the same problems and added more:

- "An inapropriate system of organization, management and legislation in education and training.
- And a "severe lack and low efficiency in use of resources for education and training."

As a result, Vietnam predicts it will soon face a shortage of skilled workers and highly qualified technicians, not a desirable situation for a country that is trying to attract foreign investment and move into a competitive free market position.

Vietnam has embraced the idea that they need a community college system to remedy many of these ills, but that is another set of problems. The educational hierarchy does not have a grasp of what a community college is, what it looks like, or how it works:

- They have little experience with workplace participation in curricular development. They are new to building and maintaining healthy give-and-take relationships between business/industry and education.
- They have never seen education that is supported by community taxes or experienced that kind of accountability.
- They have no history of open enrollment or the instructional strategies and infrastructure needed to assure that a diverse group of people can all achieve workplace competency.

I know many of these problems have an uncomfortably familiar ring to them. Don't we all face these issues everyday?

But the American brand of community college education is unique in all these features and derives much of its strength from these very issues. Without a grasp of workplace competency, diverse student learning needs, or educational accountability for student outcomes, Vietnam will not be able to move its vocational education system into the next century.

One of the key problems is that they have just never seen anything like community college education before. As a result, we encountered opposition to signing agreements about getting the work started on community colleges in Vietnam. The local people are ready and eager to start, whether they understand all the implications and features or not. They feel strongly that they'll just have to jump in and learn to swim. In one place, in the province of Baria-Vung Tau, the local People's Committee has already purchased a piece of land for their college and they're ready to start building.

But the upper level hierarchy is moving more slowly. (Does this also have a familiar ring? We're not really so different when it comes down to it.) The State Planning Committee and the Ministry of Planning and Investment have other priorities rather than community college development right now, so they have not been willing to sign any agreements with us yet. We found ourselves trading drafts back and forth over several days while I was there, debating whether a key word to be inserted should be "proposes" or "appreciates."

(By the way, if you go to Vietnam, I suggest you take along a very good interpreter who also knows the Vietnamese education system. The language and the understanding of the big picture are crucial to building agreements and understanding of how we can work together.)

Thus, funding is and will continue to be a major barrier to any new community college development work in Vietnam. They are seeking to guarantee loans locally, but those sources are limited. They encounter political snares at every turn. For example, official relations between the U.S. and Vietnam are currently handled through the Charge d'Affaires, a much slower process than working through an ambassador with a full staffing contingent. Also, until we have an ambassador, other groups that could give Vietnam help, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development, do not have the mechanisms they need to work. But it is unlikely, given politics in the U.S., that there will be an ambassador to Vietnam until well after the November presidential elections. UNESCO, though convinced of the Vietnam's extensive educational problems and calling for a dramatic overhaul of the educational system, provides no funding of any sort either.

There are other barriers too. The Saigon Times Weekly News Magazine's early February issue describes their deteriorating infrastructure and inefficient services sector as "below average, even by developing country standards." Those daunting problems include the following:

- Nearly 1/6 of the country's railroad track is in desperate need of immediate, major repair.
- Only 8.5% of Vietnam's roads are paved.

- Only 10.4% of the nation's bridges have a capacity greater than 10 tons.
- And there are only six telephones for every 1000 people.

I am sure there are days when the Vietnamese people, in Baria Vung Tau, for example, just want to throw up their hands and give up. But I am also confident that they won't. They can't afford to give up, and we can't afford to let them. What can we do?

I believe there are several roles we can play:

1. We must continue to get to know each other. We must sponsor more visits and more exchanges, more extended stays for faculty and administrators here, and in Vietnam.

2. We must help them with feasibility studies. We're trying to set up an agreement right now with Baria-Vung Tau to do a feasibility study for them so that we all know more clearly what needs to be done and how best to do it.

3. We must aid them in funding in whatever ways we can. If we can be a pipeline to federal or private funding here in the U.S. to support projects to assist in the development of community colleges in the Vietnam, then we should consider that.

4. We must work to improve our own understanding of issues and the need for international development, both on our campuses and among ourselves. A prime opportunity for that will be at the Summer CCID conference which will focus on the Pacific Rim. I urge you to participate.

As any of you who have travelled to developing countries can testify, CCID's mission becomes very personal once you've been there. It is hard to return home to all the blessings we enjoy and not remember that there are people all over the world who can benefit immensely from our expertise and our interest.

There's a traditional saying in Vietnam, "Let the whole leaf envelope the torn leaf." This image comes from a Pacific Rim practice of wrapping cooked rice--rice cakes and rice balls--in tree leaves rather than paper so that they don't stick to the wrapping. Many kinds of rice cakes are even wrapped in leaves before cooking. The people pick the leaves from their trees and carefully wrap the food in layers, covering any torn spots with a whole leaf, reinforcing the weak spots to protect the rice cake. I don't see us as protectors or the saviors of the schools in Vietnam or anywhere else in the Pacific Rim. But I do think there are times when we can be the whole leaf for them as they develop, which is good for that part of the world, and, by extension for us in the U.S.

But international education is always an exchange. There will be other times as we work with these nations in which they can be the whole leaf for us as we learn new strategies, new insights, and new wisdom from working with these developing countries.

I hope you have recharged and renewed yourselves at this conference and that we'll see you at the summer conference as well. Please consider starting a new project in international education this year. Perhaps something here has given you a new idea or a new contact. I encourage you to explore it and exploit it fully, for it is crucial to our own continued good health and to the future of our world that we each find how we can best be a whole leaf for someone else.